ADHD drugs under fire

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Concerns have been raised that drugs used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may not be effective in the long term.

US researchers believe that drugs such as Ritalin and Concerta may only be more effective than therapy for a short period.

Their findings, shown tonight on BBC1's Panorama programme, also suggest that long-term use of the drugs could stunt children's growth.

Hyperactivity is shown by over-activity, inattention and impulsiveness occurring at the same time, with ADHD being an extreme form at a level that impairs learning and function.

The new concerns about drugs for ADHD, the most common of the psychiatric disorders that appear in childhood, result from the Multimodal Treatment Study of Children with ADHD.

This study has been monitoring nearly 600 children across the US who have been receiving one of four treatments for ADHD.

These are medication alone; psychosocial/behavioural treatment alone; a combination of both; or routine community care.

Initial findings reported in December 1999 said that combination treatments and medication alone were both more effective than behavioural treatments and routine community treatments in reducing ADHD symptoms.

But the latest findings appear to contradict this, according to the Panorama programme.

"I think that we exaggerated the beneficial impact of medication in the first study," the report's co-author, Professor William Pelham of the University of Buffalo, told the BBC.

"We had thought that children medicated longer would have better outcomes. That didn't happen to be the case.

"The children had a substantial decrease in their rate of growth so they weren't growing as much as other kids both in terms of their height and in terms of their weight. And the second was that there were no beneficial effects - none."